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Pinkett: Professional Development of an Archivist: Some Ways and Means  
*PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN ARCHIVIST*  
*SOME WAYS AND MEANS*

Harold T. Pinkett

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**G**enuine professional work is basically intellectual and is usually undertaken only after college and post-graduate education. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that culture of the mind in academic experience can be one of the first aids to professional growth. This seems equally as true today as it did more than a century ago when John Henry Cardinal Newman, in the course of his famous defense of a "liberal education," contended:

General culture of mind is the best aid to professional and scientific study...and the man who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze, who has refined his taste and formed his judgment and sharpened his mental vision will...be placed in that state of the intellect in which he can take up any one of the sciences or callings...for which he has a taste or special talent, with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger.<sup>1</sup>

The cultivation of intellectual power, therefore, may be viewed as an aid in any calling. It is obvious, however, that such power, when brought to a particular professional endeavor, needs to be accompanied by specialized training. The nature of this necessary training for an efficient American archivist has been a subject of discussion among archivists and historians from the era of Waldo G. Leland to the age of Theodore R. Schellenberg.

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The basic content of such training recommended in 1938 by a committee of the Society of American Archivists, headed by Samuel Flagg Bemis, still invites attention and in its educational emphasis remains without significant challenge. For those persons who were to assume the most responsible positions in national, state, and local archival administration, and presumably perform with the highest professional standards, the Bemis Committee called for specialization "in the social sciences, including a reliable knowledge of the American political system and its political development, together with the history of the United States and a broad knowledge of modern history and international relations." Basic elements of this specialization, it was felt, might well be obtained through study in American history leading to the doctoral degree. For those who were to be entrusted with archival responsibilities in small public agencies and private organizations, and who apparently were to work under less exacting standards, the Bemis Committee recommended study in social sciences on the level of the master's degree. Some young men and women, of course, by "hard work and self-discipline and study" might well deserve to attain the highest ranks of archival employment without formal university training.<sup>2</sup>

Three decades after the Bemis proposals, leading American archivists still agree with the basic emphasis on historical study. Schellenberg wrote in 1968 that "The best training that an archivist can have...is...in history. Such training has a twofold value for him. It will lead him to appreciate the value of archives and manuscripts, for they are the source material used in producing historical monographs. It will also fit him for his work." Schellenberg reasoned that courses in national history would provide an archivist with a knowledge of his country's development and of the documentation upon which it was based. Moreover, the instruction in research methodology would "teach him to look into the origin, development, and working of human institutions."<sup>3</sup>

Important as historical and related social science study may be for the professional development of an archivist, it needs to be buttressed by methodological training in archival administration. Here the archivist can learn the basic principles and techniques that distinguish his profession.



Some three decades of experimentation with methodological training in the United States have produced varied opportunities to learn the fundamental tenets of archival enterprise. The latest directory of educational opportunities, published by the Society of American Archivists in December, 1973, lists some sixty courses, programs, and institutes at academic and archival institutions in the United States and Canada. (Current information on opportunities for archival training is provided in a bimonthly newsletter published by the Society.) These offerings of course vary in scope and quality. Though the Society has recognized the need for evaluating them, it has lacked the resources.

When instruction in archival principles and techniques has not been available, conscientious archivists often have been able to increase their proficiency through work experience. Indeed, many tasks in archival arrangement, description, and reference require a minimum of theoretical study and a maximum of practical consideration and imagination. It should not be forgotten that pioneer staff members of American archival institutions often were scholars who possessed no training in archival methodology, but were able to adapt themselves and develop techniques for their profession and for the new problems they faced in archival administration. History has credited many of them with brilliant performances.

The professional development of an archivist should not end with his training, formal or informal, in archival administration. Rather, such experience should be the foundation for professional development. Upon this foundation can be based a number of efforts that broaden and enrich his contribution to his archival institution, the public, and the profession. His job assignments, for example, in description, analysis, and evaluation of records may offer opportunities for introducing new techniques and casting new flashes of light upon obscure, significant documentation. His service to visiting researchers may aid him in keeping abreast of scholarly interests in varied fields and give him fresh insights into the value of the documentary resources entrusted to his care.

Still another opportunity for professional self-improvement may be offered by formal in-service training. Changing conditions often require new professional techniques

and outlooks. Accordingly, archival institutions may find it advantageous to have particular employees enrolled in programs to keep them posted on new developments in their special fields. It is generally recognized that archival personnel concerned with technical and administrative matters should receive important consideration for enrollment in these programs. Less recognized, unfortunately, is the possible need of in-service training to keep subject matter specialists abreast of historiographical and other research trends with which they should be familiar in describing, servicing, and evaluating records. Hence the professional competence of the archivist might well be enhanced by his enrollment in refresher courses in history, public administration, American civilization, and other subjects.

Professional insights gained in these jobs and job-related situations may be strengthened by other experiences. Participation in activities of professional societies and the reading of their publications are immediately suggested. Attendance and involvement in meetings and other affairs of national, regional, and state groups of archivists obviously increase one's professional stature and usefulness. Less obvious for this purpose, but nevertheless important, is cultivation and maintenance of close contact with scholarly groups whose members profit, or can profit substantially and continually, from the use of archival resources. If a principal *raison d'etre* of the archivist is service to needs of scholarly research, such contact would seem to be indispensable. This, of course, is not to suggest that he has no obligations for service to organizations that create his holdings and provide financial support for their administration, or for assistance to varied non-scholarly inquirers. It is only contended, rather, that he clearly should have good contact with those searchers or potential searchers, the service of whose needs tends to exact the greatest intellectual skill. Not content with dialogues among themselves, archivists seeking greater enlightenment for performance of their tasks will participate in affairs of varied scholarly groups and will strive to involve members of these groups in discussing, planning, and evaluating archival activities.

Moreover, there is professional enrichment to be found in taking archives to the public beyond the search room and the exhibit hall. Such service can be rendered



effectively through publications and appearances before professional, academic, and other groups. Archival, historical, and related social science journals welcome articles describing broad research potentialities of particular bodies of documentary materials or exemplifying new research uses of such materials. The pages of the *American Archivist* always have been open to writers describing significant archival resources, as well as to those discussing archival principles, techniques, and achievements. *Prologue, the Journal of the National Archives* invites contributions based on specialized knowledge of particular classes of records and in general those enhancing the interchange of information and ideas between archivists and users of archives. National, regional, and state historical and archival journals have been receptive to articles revealing the archivist's unique grasp of the research value of his holdings. Teachers, students, public officials, and varied citizen groups are becoming more aware of the educational, cultural, legal, and administrative value of archives and are seeking more enlightenment concerning their nature and use. In responding to this public interest, the archivist is likely to be inspired to deepen and refine knowledge that he has gained at his institution in hours of arranging, describing, servicing, and evaluating records. In so doing he will be opening the world of archives to a growing number of persons. Moreover, in the words of Albert R. Newsome, first president of the Society of American Archivists, he will be making himself "more culturally dynamic and significant" and will be contributing to the "development of the archival profession as an...agent of American scholarship and culture."<sup>4</sup>

The professional insights and usefulness of an archivist may be enhanced further by his scholarly efforts. This view is contested by those who perceive the archivist essentially as a manservant to the visiting scholar or a miner of documentary nuggets to be refined by the academician. Accordingly, it is held that if the archivist uses records for his own research, even on his own time, he inevitably develops a conflict of professional interest that lessens his usefulness as an archivist. While some misguided students of history entrusted with archival tasks may poorly conceive the proper emphasis in these tasks, there is no inherent incompatibility in an archivist using records for research that does not conflict with his archival duties. Indeed, his use in some instances may effectively exemplify and publicize the research value of

archival materials far better than an unimaginative, stereotyped archival compilation. Hilary Jenkinson, who frowned on the archivist assuming the mantle of an historian, conceded that "the Archivist must himself turn Historian in at least one field--that of Administrative History and it would be hard if he were cut off from occasional excursions into others."<sup>5</sup>

Excursions, if you please, into the scholarly world also tend to make the archivist a more viable and credible character in that realm. With some reputation for scholarship, he is more likely to reduce the credibility gap between doubting and demanding academic searchers and seemingly unresponsive keepers of records. It is also relevant to note that many archival decisions importantly affect the interests of scholars. H. G. Jones, in his perceptive study, *The Records of a Nation*, has called attention to the "awesome duty" of archivists in determining what records should be permanently preserved for research and other purposes.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, W. Kaye Lamb has pointed out frequently the crucial role of archivists in judging the needs of scholars and in passing "life and death sentence" on records relating to varied aspects and periods of the history of the region with which their institutions are concerned.<sup>7</sup> Lamb has concluded:

Experience in historical research enables one to appreciate how manuscripts and records are used. The archivists must be able to judge the probable value of sources to a scholar or research worker, and this ability can be developed best by personal experience in research.<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted furthermore that the suggested scholarly stance of the archivist does not need to be confined to historical research. There are many areas of archival policy, principle, and practice that deserve more intensive investigation and scholarly exposition than shown in existing archival literature or provided in training programs. Schellenberg's last major publication, *The Management of Archives*, appropriately pointed out the need for further study and evaluation of a number of methodological matters as a prerequisite to the standardization of procedures. It noted that although this standardization must be effected collaboratively, contributions to the systematization of techniques could be made individually.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the comparing of institutional policies and practices and the sharing of ideas and experiences



contribute to professional growth and outlook. Archivists seeking to broaden their experience should seek participation in special studies, purposeful travel, and other enterprises that take them to a wider world of concern and action in the preservation and use of archival resources.

Although the primary purpose of this paper has been to describe individual efforts that contribute to professional development, it seems appropriate to mention the importance of institutional encouragement in these efforts. Such encouragement can be offered in many ways and is vital for creation of a positive and sympathetic climate for professional growth. One of the important elements of such a climate, perhaps the most important, is morale. Morale, in the words of Leonard D. White, "reflects a social-psychological situation, a state of mind in which men and women voluntarily seek to develop and apply their full powers to the task upon which they are engaged, by reason of the intellectual or moral satisfaction which they derive from their own self-realization, their achievements in their chosen field, and their pride in the service."<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, White and other authorities on public administration have concluded that in a climate of good morale there are opportunities for individual self-expression, the development of individual pride in workmanship, stimulation of a sense of identity with the employing organization, and creative participation in the formulation and pursuit of organizational objectives. Without question, good morale is as vital in archival work as in any other institutional enterprise.

Other institutional circumstances also significantly affect individual motivation for professional improvement. The participation of an archivist in affairs of professional societies, research projects, and varied public relations efforts, for example, may be dependent upon institutional endorsement, liberal leave policy, and financial assistance. Although intellectual, social, and other nonfinancial rewards of an organization may loom large in the aspirations of an archivist, financial returns are natural components of such aspirations. It is unrealistic to assume that the desire of an archivist to increase his professional skills in institutional activities has no significant relationship to financial earnings. Philip Mason noted nearly ten years ago, after surveying the economic status of archivists, that relatively low salaries were a major problem not only in attracting college graduates to the archival



profession, but also in retaining experienced persons. He therefore contended that the problem deserved the "concerted attention" of professional organizations and archival institutions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is equally unrealistic to think that motivation in professional work will not be adversely affected by superior financial rewards given more regularly for managerial performance than for professional expertise. Concern for morale and development of archivists, therefore, should be manifested to a strong degree by institutional efforts to accord professional contributions some rewards equivalent to those too often bestowed only for administrative advancement.

Varied ways and means, therefore, can be used to assist the professional development of an archivist. The development begins best on a basic intellectual foundation. It builds and takes form with specialized training, job experience, scholarly effort, and contacts with professional, educational, and other groups. The professional eminence that the archivist attains may be determined importantly by his alertness in seeing opportunities for self-improvement and his motivation and zeal in using them. He may not develop the capability that Francis Bacon attributed to a wise man--to "make more opportunities than he finds." With diligence and institutional encouragement, however, he may obtain the satisfaction of personal achievement contemplated in the observation of Samuel Johnson: "To improve the golden moment of opportunity and catch the good that is within our reach is the great art of life."

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Henry Cardinal Newman (Daniel N. O'Connell, ed.), *The Idea of a University* (New York, 1941), 186.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Flagg Bemis, "The Training of Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist*, 2 (July, 1939), 159-161.

<sup>3</sup>T. R. Schellenberg, "Archival Training in Library Schools," *American Archivist*, 31 (April, 1968), 158.

<sup>4</sup>Albert Ray Newsome, "The Archivist in American Scholarship," *American Archivist*, 2 (October, 1939), 223.

<sup>5</sup>Hilary Jenkinson, *The English Archivist: A New Profession* (London, 1948), 30.

<sup>6</sup>H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation* (New York, 1969), 81.

<sup>7</sup>W. Kaye Lamb, "The Archivist and the Historian," *American Historical Review*, 68 (January, 1963) 385-386, "The Changing Role of the Archivist," *American Archivist*, 29 (January, 1966), 6.

<sup>8</sup>W. Kaye Lamb, "The Modern Archivist: Formally Trained or Self-Educated?" *American Archivist*, 31 (April, 1968), 176-177.

<sup>9</sup>T. R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York, 1965), 61-79.

<sup>10</sup>Leonard D. White, "Administration, Public," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (15 vols.; New York, 1930), I, 446.

<sup>11</sup>Philip P. Mason, "Economic Status of the Archival Profession, 1965-66," *American Archivist*, 30 (January, 1967), 105, 120.